



Bada Baz!

While directors around him were blowing things up, Baz Luhrmann decided to re-invent the musical with *Moulin Rouge*. It was crazy, but it worked, and the special edition DVD looks set to work too.

WORDS: DEBRA TAYLOR

↓ VITAL STATS

MOULIN ROUGE (2001)



SYNOPSIS Aspiring poet and young romantic Christian leaves England in search of the bohemian lifestyle of Paris. Winding up in Montmartre, he is immediately catapulted into a world of colour, excitement, hedonism and absinthe. Dragged along to the Moulin Rouge by a gang of eccentric artists to convince beautiful courtesan Satine to be in a play, Christian is mistaken for a duke who Satine and her boss, the energetic Zidler, want to invest in the nightclub. Plans, of course, go awry when Satine and Christian fall in love, and must hide their feelings in order to fool the duke into still putting up the promised cash.

ON SALE 5 December 2001
RRP \$39.95 **RATING** M15+

STARRING Nicole Kidman, Ewan McGregor, Jim Broadbent, John Leguizamo, Richard Roxburgh

DIRECTOR Baz Luhrmann

PRODUCERS: Steve E. Andrews, Fred Baron, Martin Brown, Catherine Knapman, Baz Luhrmann, Catherine Martin

WRITERS Baz Luhrmann, Craig Pearce

MUSIC Various

Commercial nouse and artistic integrity rarely meet in the world of movie making. One, on the whole, cancels out the other, leaving behind either worthy box office flops, or woefully disappointing money-spinners.

Few directors manage to bring the two strands together without compromising their vision or, indeed, completely selling it up the river. If all Baz Luhrmann had achieved with his 'red curtain trilogy' was to maintain his vision and produce a healthy profit, it would be impressive. But here is a man who – in the era of computer-generated blow'em up movies – has tackled ballroom dancing, a Shakespearean tragedy and of all things, a musical. You'd have to be mad, some would say Luhrmann is, but you get that with geniuses, and whatever you think of Luhrmann's work, he has proven himself to be a genius of the extraordinary, a master of the unexpected, and one of the few modern directors who makes films, rather than just movies.

Since *Strictly Ballroom*, Luhrmann has shown an ability to use the camera as a player in the piece, rather than simply to record. Add to that the scope of his vision – limited only, it seems, by his imagination – and you have a true innovator. And yeah, okay, he still made a musical. But that, says Luhrmann, was the crazy plan all along.

"When we were trying to do the screenplay of *Strictly Ballroom*, Craig Pearce [his long time writing partner] and I sat down and we wrote a naturalised screenplay. There were factory scenes, there was a union walk out. What we ended up with was basically *Dirty Dancing*, which is not to denigrate that picture. But what we lost was the sort of metaphorical power of the play of *Strictly Ballroom*. So we had to go looking for a cinematic form that could contain this heightened creative world and we reached back to the musicals of the 1940s and 50s.

"So when I moved on to *Romeo + Juliet* I had been researching in India and that was when I had my first experience of a Bollywood musical. So we thought about

doing a western form of this. There was a stage in *Romeo + Juliet* when I might have made that as a musical. *Romeo + Juliet* was a kind of step to where we now are with *Moulin Rouge*."

Moulin Rouge, it seems, was the natural end of Luhrmann's 'red curtain' journey, leaving behind the reality of *Strictly Ballroom* and the wordiness of *Romeo + Juliet* for music. The director admits the story of star crossed lovers Satine and Christian isn't exactly complicated, but that was part of the plan too.

"The very nature of this theatricalised cinema is that it is fundamental that the audience knows how the story is going to end when it begins. So the universal magic of music is your great friend. On a personal level I lived in an isolated place and music was a window into a larger world. On a story telling level music is one of the assets that you have got to lean on in a big way."

In *Moulin Rouge*, the music is far more important than the lightweight script, even if it is a mish-mash of pop songs strung together to provide a language in which the characters can communicate. It's not a new idea – musicals traditionally used pop songs of the day. But Luhrmann has repackaged it into a visual feast and with a rare simplicity that seems refreshing in an increasingly cynical world.

"These are old ideas. When Judy Garland sings 'Clang Clang Clang Went the Trolley' in the movie *Meet Me In St Louis* – which is set in 1900 – she is singing big band 1940s swing music. It's a radio hit of her time used to understand character in another time and another place.

"So that is one fairly common device. It is also a common device that the audience have some pre-existing relationship with at least some of the music before they see the film. For instance, *White Christmas* is in more than one film. So the audience is going into a kind of sing-a-long."

And sing-along we did. Despite mixed reviews from the critics, *Moulin Rouge* swept the Australian box office. It proved that audiences will accept something out of the ordinary, and that Nicole Kidman and Ewan McGregor could carry a tune.

"I saw a lot of people," Luhrmann admits about the search for his stars. "I had worked with Nicole and had seen Ewan →